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NOTEWORTHY/Chestnut Hill LOCAL by Michael Caruso for 12/28/2006

Donald Nally conducted his newly minted choir, the Crossing, in a program of Christmas music Friday night in the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Despite its having been scheduled only three days before Christmas, itself, the concert drew an audience that nearly filled the church's main sanctuary and that gave Nally and his singers several well-earned standing ovations.

Nally has become something of a legend among local lovers of choral music. His triple tenures as artistic director of the Choral Arts Society of Philadelphia, director of the chorus of the Opera Company of Philadelphia and choirmaster/music director of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Philadelphia established standards at those three institutions that have never been surpassed. It's so surprise, then, learning that he has just been named the director of the chorus of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, one of the premiere opera companies in America and, in fact, the world.

The Crossing's Friday evening program was a testament to the kind of music and music-making that have established and sustained Nally's reputation. The roster of music achieved the triply admirable goals of presenting music that is newly composed, mostly unfamiliar and yet totally accessible. Even more impressive, the program maintained an incredibly high consistency of quality and compatibility. There wasn't a dud among the 18 pieces and each one led convincingly into the next until the entire program was accomplished.

Nally's hallmark technical perfection was everywhere in evidence. From virtually the first note to the last, ensemble was immaculate among the 18 singers and organist Scott Dettra. Aided by the incomparable acoustics of Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church -- bright yet resonant -- the range of dynamics spanned the softest softs to the loudest louds. Pianissimos at the lowest level of the dynamic range were clear and steady in focus and projection while fortissimos at the highest level were majestic in warmth and fullness of tone. Diction in Latin, modern and medieval English, Scottish and German was consistently crystalline in its crisp comprehensibility even when the musical texture boasted a full harmony of vocal parts. Balances between the various sections of the choir and between the choir and Chestnut Hill Presbyterian's mighty Mander pipe organ were flawlessly set and maintained. Phrasing was both lyrical and dramatic in accordance with the meaning of the text.

The cumulative effect of all these separate technical strengths was a performance that rang with the clarion tones of peerless interpretive conviction. Nally, the Crossing and Dettra proffered renditions that caught and delineated the narrative intent and spiritual revelation of the words and music. James MacMillan's "Seinte Mari moder milde," sung from the organ loft, was eerie yet lovely in its evocation of medieval reverence for the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus. George Guest's English-language arrangement of the Welsh "Sugan" was touching in its gentility. Roaldn Martin's "Ave Maria, O auctrix vitae" glowed with mystic adoration. Michael Emery's "Angelus

ad Virginem" bounded with the exuberance of a medieval English carol-turned-dance. Kenneth Leighton's "A Hymn to the Nativity" was hauntingly beautiful, Robert Convery's "Christmas Daybreak" was hushed with wonder and awe, Jonathan Dove's "The Three Kings" was somber, Dettra's organ registration was gorgeous in Harold Darke's "In the bleak midwinter" and Benjamin Boyle's "Lo, how a rose e'er blooming" and Leighton's arrangement of "O leave your sheep" received a rendition that was a culminating summation of all the glowing attributes of the evening's music-making -- supreme technical mastery employed for artistic integrity and musical expressibility.